

Julia Reichert and Jim Klein “Our first priority is reaching people”

by Chuck Kleinhans

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Julia Reichert and Jim Klein are radical activists and filmmakers who live in Dayton, Ohio. Their first film, *GROWING UP FEMALE* (1971), is one of the most widely used consciousness-raising films in the women's movement. After making *GROWING UP FEMALE*, they helped establish New Day Films, a cooperative for distributing feminist films and began a film on women and crime which remains uncompleted, though they are now planning to shoot new footage and finish it. *METHADONE: AN AMERICAN WAY OF DEALING* was finished in the spring of 1974, and they are presently editing a film on women labor organizers in the 1930s.

I met them last spring when they were in Chicago shooting interviews for the labor film. They stayed with me, and the combined visit and first issue of *JUMP* made it a lively time. Since then, they've stayed with me a number of times when they were in Chicago. I can't write an “objective” piece about Julia and Jim, knowing them as well as I do, and sharing with them similar politics, a love for film, good food, the Midwest, and cats. So, this is more of a letter about them. The conversations are from tapes made after the showing of *METHADONE* at the Chicago women's film festival in September.

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Chuck: I know you do other things besides filmmaking.

Julia: We're political. We see ourselves primarily as activists and organizers. We don't even spend most of our time filmmaking. Maybe with distribution we do ... That takes a lot of time.

Chuck: What is your other political work?

Julia: It differs with each of us. A lot of it centers around NAM, New American Movement. We belong to a national organization, which to me is important. It's hard to be an independent radical.

Chuck: Can you define NAM?

Jim: NAM formed out of a lot of people who came out of the dissolution of the New Left who didn't know where to go, and knew the value of a political organization and who had come to a basic Marxist politics. One of the key things about NAM has been that it started without a line, without a set political doctrine. That was so firm you either had to believe in it totally or not join. The principles of unity in NAM are somewhat vague. Basically you have to be a socialist, but if you are, you can join and work to help develop the political theory and practice of the organization.

Julia: It sees itself as a revolutionary organization trying to build toward democratic socialism. It has about 45 chapters. And this is very important to me, of all the left groups I know, it has the best politics about women.

A lot of our political work grows out of our local chapter work, and also for me out of the national organization because I've been involved with it on the national level since the beginning. What that means concretely, in my local work for example, is helping to teach a course in capitalism and socialism for six months, which was very exciting. At other times it might mean, for me, being active on the women's center board, or teaching a photography course there, or before there was a women's center being active in getting one. For me it also means being in a socialist feminist consciousness-raising group. Sometimes it means organizing around impeachment or around the Farah boycott. My continuous work has been focused on women more than anything else, both locally and nationally.

Also nationally, I get to do a good amount of speaking. At first I balked when people asked me to come and speak. Filmmakers get people into a big media trip. People regard a filmmaker as someone really special: as someone you invite who's really special and has The Word to tell you. I reject that. But when I saw people looked up to me I was really shocked and didn't know how to deal with it at all. What I finally realized was that if people were going to put me in that position, I'd better get my politics together and have something to say, and offer some leadership to people in the best way, a non-oppressive way, that I could. So partly through my development in NAM and through reading, I tried to get my ideas together about where the women's movement might go. I go around the country a lot now. Sometimes as a feminist talking about films, sometimes as a socialist, but more often combining the two.

Jim: I mostly do local chapter work. Besides national issues like the

Farah strike and the Farmworkers' boycott, we've been working in Dayton in opposing a redevelopment plan. We brought in the Alive and Trucking Theatre group from Minneapolis, who do a great play about urban renewal. We do a lot of local organizing, a lot of teaching.

Julia: I'd add the responsibilities of New Day, which is a kind of low level organizing. One of my responsibilities for New Day is answering the mail addressed to us as a group: things like how to do you run a women's film series, what films should we use for a women's studies class, etc.. And that gives me a chance to write back or phone people. Mostly I find they haven't thought about films about working class women, or radical films, so I try to suggest that to them. In that way we're kind of a resource center for people.

Chuck: How has the existence of New Day and distributing your films yourselves affected your filmmaking?

Jim: New Day isn't handling the methadone film or the labor film. But knowing you can distribute a film independently has affected the style of filmmaking and decisions we make. For instance, in the methadone film, we decided at one point that it should be shown in two parts with a break in the middle for discussion. Now if we had to deal with commercial distributors, we probably wouldn't have made that decision. We wouldn't have been sure that people who got the film also got information on how to do it, material for leading a discussion, and so forth. With the labor film we probably wouldn't have made it at all, because we couldn't have gotten commercial distribution for it. It's a film about three women who were Communist Party labor organizers in the 1930s. A lot of distributors are scared of handling anything with explicitly left politics.

Julia: It makes me realize that we can get these films out. It gives you confidence. Also we've been with so many audiences and sat through GROWING UP FEMALE and other films so many times that we know how people respond and don't respond.

Jim: I know I'd find it hard to do a cinema verité film after having shown films over and over again and seeing how different people pick up or don't pick up on the same things and seeing how someone's background, class, and past experience really relates to what they see in a film. We try to work on that in making a new film—to try to deal with different experiences, to deal with situations people can empathize with. Not just on a level that would affect middle class intellectuals who have a lot of experience in seeing film, or simply addressing only working class people who have a different set of expectations, but trying to combine the two. One thing you learn in distribution and showing films is the massive size of the U.S. audience and the diversity of it.

Julia: We really saw this with GROWING UP FEMALE— the

importance of films being entertaining, of moving on quickly, of having good music and funny parts, being grabbing in some way, both emotionally and intellectually.

Jim: We've gotten a basic sense of film as a communication medium and not just an art medium. It becomes clearer as you show your films. It becomes harder to make decisions based just on artistry and not on usage. A lot of filmmakers who are isolated from their audiences prefer to deal with what makes a "good" film, a "complex" film. These things are very important. But we've also learned from audiences that a film can be simple and be good and reach an audience with a political message. Our first priority is reaching people in whatever we do in film.

I think METHADONE is a great film, and that's not just because friends made it. It conveys a massive amount of information very efficiently. It goes far beyond the usual documentary presenting a problem in isolation. It's a film not only about "the methadone problem" but about social control in the United States: who does the controlling and who are the victims. After seeing it the first time, we talked a lot about the last section, on the RAP collective and their methadone-free rehabilitation program, because the political points being made didn't seem perfectly clear.

Chuck: It wasn't clear how RAP was different than Synanon, and all the other group rehabilitation programs we've seen in films like DAVID (Leacock and Pennebaker).

Julia: It's carried in the narration, but the visuals are weak there.

Jim: One of the film's purposes was to move therapeutic communities to the left, but I think it's a mistake we made that it can be confused with a Synanon type group.

Julia: I think we were just overly cautious about how far we could go politically. We thought, "Gee, we've got to do it really quick, and just slide the message in there so the audience won't be alienated." And we find people are missing it.

Jim: Some people have said, "That really shows that love can change anything." And that's a real political mistake.

Julia: We're thinking of recutting the end.

Jim: But we didn't get synch footage on the political education class. We should have gotten someone who had gone through RAP and was now out in the community doing political organizing. You add those two things and it solves a lot of problems people have with it now.

Julia: It's a bit romantic. We were trying to get the audience to like these

people and see they were political, too. But we tried so hard for the first, that the second point was partly lost.

Chuck: It wasn't clear if they used methadone in the RAP community.

Jim: I know. They don't—and it says it twice in the narration.

Julia: But people watch films and we didn't show it. We said they don't use methadone a second time because people didn't catch it on the first cut. But lots of people still don't get it.

Chuck: Do you get different reactions from different audiences?

Jim: In the first section, about Dayton, white liberals think the film will be seen by others as racist because it shows blacks ripping off, manipulating the clinic. That's a real liberal trip. No black person has gotten that from the film.

Julia: With the RAP section, liberals are very skeptical. They don't know what "collective" means or what it feels like. They don't have those values, and they just don't know what it's about. Whereas black people—even nonpolitical black people—really get it right away. They understand what organizing in the community is, and they have no question about its legitimacy. By the end of the film, people are really with it, and they're ready to hear a more radical politics than we put in.

Jim, We showed the film in Minneapolis the other night and the director of a methadone clinic came. He passed out pro-methadone literature. What an apologist! He got up and said, "The film is excellent, but we don't do that at our clinic." When we questioned him why people were nodding off, he said, "Well, we keep them on very low dosages, and that doesn't happen." Low dosages help, but people are still being strongly affected by it.

We didn't use a lot of statistics we'd worked up: like 75% dirty urine (indicating use of heroin or other drugs while taking methadone) rates in New York, Philadelphia, and DC. I want to ask you a question. Did you get the feeling that this wasn't just a bad clinic in Dayton, but this was a national program?

Chuck: Of course, but ...

Jim: You're a radical. (laughter)

Afterword

by Chuck Kleinhans

I showed METHADONE to my composition class (14 blacks, 2 whites,

predominantly working class) at Chicago State University in the fall. From students' reactions during the screening, in discussion afterwards, and in papers they wrote, I learned a few more things about the film.

It shows that there is a methadone program at work which is part of a general system of social control of working class black and white youth. And it shows how that system works. But what it doesn't show, or at least didn't to my students, is exactly how that system could be changed, except through the community-developed alternative like the RAP collective. The film needs an analysis of what contradictions exist within the system, and therefore of what points of leverage for change exist at the present moment. But since the radical community hasn't developed such an analysis, it's an understandable lack within the film.

Apparently the medical community is split on the issue of methadone with the government and drug companies on one side and on the other, groups like Healthpac and Medical Committee for Human Rights, parts of the establishment medical profession, community groups, addicts and ex-addicts. Where would one start organizing, given this split? For example, since addicts have such immediate and massive problems keeping up their habit, are they an organizable constituency?

Clearly this level of analysis is very complicated. It would require both a general political perspective and a constant organizing effort, and then reevaluation in terms of that experience. Within the film itself, there is a certain gap between the very clear statement about methadone as a means of social control on the one hand, and on the other, vivid personal examples drawn from the level of the individual. Between the general social and political statement and the concrete examples lies a mass of intricate and elusive connections and contradictions. Because radicals see, or are willing to see, the connections between the two levels of social generality and individual lives, they often miss the importance of explaining the relations between these two levels to others, of detailing the mechanisms of those connections and how they might be changed. METHADONE is one of the best current radical films. It's an important first step in uncovering and organizing the challenge to the methadone system.